TURNING POINT

In England she would meander alone past quaint shop façades and down country lanes. Surely then she could find and face the truth about her marriage

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Thirty-six thousand feet up in the air, Kate scans the two photographs lying on her lap, as though she were searching out clues to Enid, and Enid's new way of life, as if they might contain guidelines for her own use. One picture reveals the dimly wet cobblestones of a London street, the low rear bumper of a parked car with its big license plate, and a dingy, quaint, gabled shop. Before it, arms folded over her coat and a wide grin on her middle-aged face, stands Enid. On the back of the snapshot and scrawled in a familiar optimistic upward loop are the words: This is mine! Getting a sign made for it this week —

The second photo is an inaoor close-up of Enid, a rather artsy image with experimental lighting glancing off her high *Continued on page 52*

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cheekbones and dappling the structured disarray of shop wares around her. This picture draws Kate more than the other, because it is an aspect of Enid she has not previously seen. Where is the expensive haircut, the Medium-Ash-Brown-32 that darkened the grey roots every five weeks? The classic suit and the gold chains? Enid's hands, clasped easily on the table, are veined and strong, the nails short, no Autumn Bronze on them now. All the fine lines show on her square, kind face, softly outlined by a dandelion frizz of brown and grey hair. She is the same person Kate has known all her life, and she is a stranger. Nothing is written as explanation on the back of this picture; perhaps because everything there is to tell is on the front—

The flight over had been smooth and uneventful, so that it seemed in character for the clouds to part and expose the green-and-beige quilt of England spread below in serene welcome. Watches were switched to the leap ahead in time, and the 747 touched down and glided to a perfect landing at Gatwick — so unlike Malton — its woods full of wild daffodils, songbirds and dense green trees. Without interruption, the 400 people formerly cocooned into the vast aircraft swept through customs and dispersed, as though they had never shared the chummy time aloft together. Kate had written Enid not to meet her. She was renting a car and would call her up in London. Even *that* was ready for her, delivered by a tiny, shy woman who earnestly welcomed her in the nearly empty waiting room, and said: "I've left it parked by the little hut out on the parking lot. You cawn't miss it, dear. A yel-

low saloon with Trust Motors on the bumper and our *Visitor To Britain* sticker on the back window. Oh! Mustn't forget your complimentary chocolates, must I? Now, just a few papers to sign and it's done then —"

It was March 31, past the time of winter-break tourists, so that the A23 traffic moved pleasantly, if erratically, toward London. Duncan had driven last time, during the tradition-imposed honeymoon that had left them spent with fatigue and wishing they'd left the trip until later. Still, it had been fun, in a nerve-wracking sort of way. Getting lost, put straight by a gentle Dorset man who'd taken them home for tea, shown them his gorgeous garden before setting them back on the right road. Four and a half years ago — my God, what a difference! Last time, off to the airport with hound-dog relatives honking in pursuit. If they *could* have, they'd have tied tin cans to the plane's tail. Two cars sped past her, and Kate felt foreign, inept, trying to adjust to the left side of the road, thinking of her lonely exit from the apartment.

You're running away! Nothing is solved by running away . . .

But he hadn't stopped her. She'd said she would take her holidays early, see Enid for the first time in two years, get away for some serious thinking. But Duncan, too surprised at the idea to think rationally, had called it running away. Why was it, she wondered, that when *men* went away, it became an adventure, a quest, an odyssey out of books? For women, it had to be cowardice. Kate shoved the small of her back into the seat, manoeuvred a baffling circle, praying she'd remember to stay to the left. We're apart for the first time, she thought, and he won't miss me. He'll buy outrageous things like steak, smoked salmon and imported tea. He'll carry the whole mess into the living room and eat it with his shoes propped up on my blue velvet chair, watching the news. Mrs. Redman, who came in once a week, will pick up and pair his separated socks, rinse out his shorts and polish the white stain on the end table where he abandons a sweating glass full of melted ice cubes . . . clucking all the time like a den mother over her errant charge.

She almost drifted into the wrong lane, thinking about this, and sweat beaded her face. The last thing she wanted to do was *die* here, cracking herself and some other poor innocent up because the last argument with Duncan had crossed the Atlantic with her, and crouched in her head now, taking her mind off the road. I should have declared the bitterness at customs, she thought wryly. It's in my hands, gripping this wheel too tightly. She imagined, too, that it had affected her face. Clamped lips, furrowed forehead that could reduce her into one of those pinched, self-pitying women who endure and shrivel, boring the world with their self-induced sainthood. Though it seemed a contradiction in terms, Kate forced herself to relax. *Slow, deep breaths. Let the hands go a little, drop-your-shoulders-they're-up-around-your-ears. Stop changing gears as though you had a mastiff pulling on a leash. Relax, Kate* — Who said that only mad people talked to themselves? Just a mile to go, and cool sanity washed over her like ice water on tired eyes. She succumbed to the traffic, letting the rented car bob along in a sea of dinosaur buses, roaring lorries and swerving speed freaks. Not competing self-consciously, but letting herself sweep along like something blowing shoreward on the incoming tide. All the frantic, lemminglike rush ground to a halt, anyway, once inside the city. And her spirits rose as she crept past a park, its lush emerald rimmed with flame-colored tulips, and patched with picnic blankets where office workers lounged over lunch sandwiches. Some small boys, fantasizing themselves into Manchester United, or Chelsea, were bounding a soccer ball from head to head in furious oblivion.

Good, thought Kate. She would let England consume her for a time, hosing out her mind with fresh images, calming it down with the ancient stability of old ones. Maybe, after two weeks, Duncan would miss her — and he might even know *why*.

The vast Regency Palace Hotel, wedged like the point of a spoke into Piccadilly Circus, had reserved her a single near the back, where car horns were

buffered to muted trumpets and the midday madness blaring outside did not penetrate. There was something restful about the first few minutes in a hotel room — neat, anonymous, still not printed with the stamp of the person who occupied it. Blank stationery stacked on the polished dresser; a gleaming sink with folded towels, but no washcloth; sterilized tumblers; the high, narrow bed where thick blankets and freshly punched pillows were hidden under a dimpled quilt; empty coat hangers dangling in a big brown cupboard that passed for a wardrobe. Kate stripped to her slip and clambered up on the bed, temporarily exhausted. It was just past one o'clock, but lunch was out of the question. Hours of force-feeding on the plane — midnight dinner, snacks, free booze, cheese and crackers, a continental breakfast — had made the thought of anything on a plate, for the time being, agonizing.

To avoid thinking of Duncan, she concentrated on Enid, who had confounded relatives and friends two years ago by amicably separating from Kate's father. It had been amicable because neither Enid nor Rafe ever fought aloud — certainly Kate had never heard open disagreements, and she'd lived at home until her marriage to Duncan. *Why* two people who seemed so considerate of one another, so overtly polite, had to separate, Kate was not entirely sure. But it seemed to centre on Enid's passionate urge to own and run her own shop. Rafe resented the fact that the idea consumed Enid entirely, turned her into a mystifying woman he scarcely recognized. He was 50, so long established in banking that he considered himself to be in the autumn of his career, and looked forward to quieter years, the striving behind him, a retirement made golden by sound investments and substantial savings. Suddenly, instead of *this* gentle goal — he and Enid walking hand in hand into a gauzy, tranquil sunset — he was faced with a wife burning with the ambition he had left far behind. Firmly, she rejected the idea of part-time volunteering. Rafe, who not only worked with money but *had* a lot of it, could see no sense to Enid's drive. All the hustle, planning and determination erupting around him — what did she *need*, for God's sake, that she didn't have? Whatever it was, it drove a wedge between them.

They had not divorced. Neither entertained the thought of remarriage. But the big house where Kate was born was sold, finally. Rafe took a posh downtown apartment, and Enid left Canada, at 48 years of age, to find her place in the country of shopkeepers. This all took place, of course, a couple of years after Kate's own marriage, long beyond the age when it could have any traumatic effect. Then, she had stood back objectively, understanding Enid's restlessness, sympathizing with Rafe's bewilderment. But it *was*, after all, their business, not hers. And then, it had seemed somehow remote, like an ongoing situation comedy she could tune in on, without having to get too involved. She and Duncan were too busy with separate careers — he in law, she in computers — too happy adding bits and pieces to the apartment, still radiating the insular optimism of newlyweds.

Kate rolled over on one side, thinking that she should call Enid. *Later, when I've had a little rest.* She fell asleep; she dreamed that she was yelling at Duncan, blaring like a fishwife, only the words spilling out were the cryptic code syllables of her profession — "*Externals! OS internals! Database, you idiot! What knowledge have you of MVT, anyway? Or CICS, for that matter?*" And, dreamily receding and advancing, Duncan in his black court robes, looking solemn and put-upon, intoning Latin in a level voice: *Ad Hominum, Ad Bacculum, Ad Populum, Ad Nauseum.*

A nap, she decided, plunging through the elbowing chaos of Piccadilly, was very overrated. She'd wakened from it stiff, unstrung, disoriented, thinking she was still in the plane, then still in the car. Get up. *Move*, she told herself sternly. She explored the hotel's maze of halls like a detective snooping out indiscretion, finally discovering a vast unused bath where she splashed and hummed, because the lock on the door wasn't operating. She dressed, back in her quiet blue-and-white room, applied some peach gleamer to make Enid think she was healthy, and stared moodily at the woman in the mirror. *Lonely people never move their faces*, she thought. *The muscles atrophy. What they see in the mirror is how they look all day.* The last time she'd looked in a hotel-room mirror, there had been no severity around her mouth, no sad opaque eyes. Duncan had come up behind her, lifted her then-long hair to kiss the nape of her neck, enclosed her in his arms . . .

She slipped sideways out of the crowd, into a store doorway, where she could examine the map Enid had sent her. On Denham Street, just off Shaftesbury — just a few doors down from Carr's pub. Kate found it, looking much like the photograph, a narrow lane with grudging, sloped sidewalks, black bicycles with wicker baskets, quaint bow-fronted stores that tottered unevenly upward to bedsits and flats with open, unscreened windows. And flowers wherever an inch of space allowed: in troughs, lined up on sills in clay pots, burgeoning over tiny wrought-iron balconies. Standing out among the gracious gilt signs was Enid's new sign, a painted crimson maple leaf:

Gifts — Cards — Authentic Canadiana
Enid J. Helby, Prop.

Kate stared through the leaded panes at Rafe's competition. How small it was — had she expected Harrods? — no bigger than her parents' luxurious bathroom in the old house. Crammed with colonial quilts, basketware, Indian beadwork, little open packages of maple sugar candies, T-shirts with a Mountie, Niagara Falls and the Toronto CN tower on them, brooding grey-blue Eskimo sculptures — Enid thought of everything. Quite irrationally, Kate had a swift clear memory of her mother years ago, when Kate could have been no more than nine or 10 years old. The house during a dinner party for some of Rafe's colleagues; Orrefors glass and Wedgwood china; the smell of good cigars and perfumed gowns and carnations spilling their spice scent from antique vases. Enid coming up the circular stairway as Kate started down. A ruffled dress that prickled, patent leather shoes that pinched. Kate not wanting to go down, the only child, to drown in that adult sea, her neck aching from always staring upward — Why so glum-looking, Kate? Impulsively: "I *hate* it. I'd rather play ball. I'd rather be in the *school*yard!" A sudden, soft expression of empathy on Enid's face, eyes shining: "Then go! Go change, quickly, before someone sees you." And as Kate ran back up, hearing Enid say, "I wish I could come, too . . ."

Well, so many years later, Enid had finally done it. She'd deserted the party for the game. Kate pressed the buzzer, waiting for the familiar whoop of delight, the Enid who had unfurled herself, like some bravely flapping flag, in a foreign land.

The first hour was talk, talk, tumbling out like the bright blurts of wine from the bottle they shared. Talk in quick, unrelated phrases, one thought leading to another. About the people "back home,"

as Enid called them . . . Rafe first, older aunts and uncles and 92-year-old Granny Bishop, who was not a blood relative, but held a kind of godmother status. "*She* thinks you're in the midst of menopausal madness," Kate told her mother, who was so animated by the visit that she kept drifting from place to place in her green caftan, looking like a tent blowing in the wind.

"Ah, dear old Mrs. Bishop," Enid said, none too convincingly. "I gave up listening to her advice when she told me to put a potato under the pillow so you'd be a girl . . ."

"Well, she was right that time."

"No," Enid said. "I didn't *put* a potato under the pillow. Look, Kate — at this rate, we're going to wear each other out. Our voices are croaking. What would *you* like to do tonight? You're the guest." Eventually, they decided on a cheap, uncomplicated dinner at The Stockpot, a rambling walk through what was left of Mayfair, and a nightcap at the pub. Enid took Kate out to the back balcony leading off her bedroom. "I'll change while you enjoy the view."

The balcony, like the two-room flat, was old, a little rickety around the edges, and Enid had a wooden clothes horse hung with dripping underwear and a tea towel occupying most of the available space. But to one side, she'd put an old-fashioned striped canvas lawn chair, the kind that surrounded bandstands in English parks, and Kate sat down, imagining her mother here in good weather. Alone, looking out at the serrated London skyline. It seemed typical of Enid to want the backdoor view, to get behind facades. Directly below were a line of little backyards separated by brick walls crumbling under ancient ivy; garbage cans, lanes that went nowhere. But above it all was the awesome silhouette of domes, spires, crosses, towers, chimney pots, and the spare arrogance of jutting office towers. Evensong bells rang somewhere, sonorous, unchanging. The sun was gone, but had hung the horizon with a mist the color of a barrow pear. *Is it enough*? Kate wondered. *Does she miss Rafe? I've been gone just 48 hours, and I wish I could share this with Duncan.*

For 70 pence, they had steak-and-kidney pie, broccoli, tea and apple crisp, jammed into a little table shared with two Australians, and under the huge, badly painted picture of Dickens' Fat Boy. They were glad to walk, and Enid, to whom historic fact clung like lint, ambled through the heart of Mayfair dispensing bits of local color — "Berkeley Square *isn't* square, I mean — those are London plane trees, they shed bark — can you imagine Disraeli sauntering along here?" — until they found Enid's favorite pub, and by then, Kate was happy to sit down again. The Crown was low-ceilinged, with a chalkboard of snack prices tacked to a sidebeam, candles in pewter sconces, chubby cracked leather chairs that hissed when the two women sat, holding their mugs of tepid beer.

"Well, you seem very happy, Enid," Kate said, raising the mug in a half-toast.

"Well, luv, you *don't*."

So she still couldn't really fool her mother. "It shows that much?"

Enid shook her head, the Beethoven frizz, which used to be "done" faithfully, standing out, breeze-blown, clean, grey. "Considering the fact that you've scarcely mentioned Duncan's name since you arrived, I supposed your occasional distracted glances might mean something. It's not serious, I hope?"

"I don't know. We've been fighting a lot lately. *Too* much. Over everything and nothing." Wanting to discover if she had inherited a communicable disease. Kate asked her mother if she and Rafe had been through that. But Enid laughed, a warm, belting chortle that drew a smile from the bartender. "Lord, no. Rafe *fight*? When we were alone together, we acted the way the Queen and Prince Philip do in public, only *I* walked three steps behind the man. No, Kate. Your father did not shout, argue, raise his voice, or harangue. He became absolutely silent, disappeared into the den, or went for a walk — until, as he said, 'it blew over.' So communication was our problem — mine as much as his. If I'd stopped playing echo to his solo, if I'd been honest, perhaps we'd still be together. He blames the shop, of course. But it simply brought a wilting situation to a head. So, you see, you can't look for your solution in our problem. It isn't the same, obviously. How long are you staying?"

"Two weeks. Just another day in London, then I'm going to see some countryside."

"And Duncan knows where you'll be, I hope?"

"Yes."

"Then this is the only advice I'm going to give: don't buckle and go back before your holiday is up. I spent too much time patching up quarrels not of my making, saying I was sorry when there was nothing to apologize for. Once that habit is entrenched, you are predictable, which is bad enough. But worse still, you are dishonest. I think it was my late-blooming candor that was hardest for Rafe to accept." Enid lit a Silk Cut, and drew the flat glass ashtray toward her. "If you go back early, because of loneliness, or even just out of a natural desire to end the quarrel — it could be misinterpreted. 'She can't live without me, not even for two weeks; she can't cope . . .' " Enid broke off, her eyes narrowing. "No," she said flatly. "I wasn't going to go this far. The *last* thing I intended to do was take sides. When your dad and I separated, relatives divided neatly into Rafe-versus-Enid camps, armed with swords of advice and ugly old grievances. Do you want another beer?"

"No, thanks." Kate knew her mother well enough to detect the signal. Her life was new, now. She had shoved Kate effectively from the nest, and she would have to sort out her own affairs.

The weekend went well, filtered sun, sightseeing without coats, dinners together. They did not speak of Rafe or Duncan again, though Kate, revisiting the Horse Guards Palace and the raven-stalked greens inside the Tower gate, was sharply reminded of Duncan the last time, clicking away with his cheap camera, keeping a diary, walking beside her with one warm arm across her shoulders. On Monday morning, Kate said goodbye to Enid, and drove away, leaving London without regrets.

Too many memories there. He can't follow me into the countryside.

She was right. For the first week, events conspired to keep her so occupied that she had no time for anything but adjustment. Rain clouds seemed to have attached themselves to her route, so that she drove with them continually scudding above the roof, draping the sky in thin silver sheets, drenching her when she stopped in a village, only to find everything closed. At Henley-on-Thames, where she refueled, the attendant discovered that the hood would not open: "Caan't check the oil, miss —summat's wrong with the release . . ." the Yorkshire lad, a long way from the moors, told her. A crowd slowly gathered, showing placid, good-natured concern, scouting the dashboard, palpating beneath the glove compartment, until they had found the release and, with immense communal effort, sprung the hood. No one had a good word for the interior. Rust, corrosion, guck and grime. "Driving far?" a pipe-smoking chap with fine Trevor Howard eyes asked her. "Rambling," Kate replied, wondering why the cautious tone of voice implied danger. "Bloody bad show," he murmured, "foisting off a mess like *this* on you. Better leave it with us overnight, and we'll send you away safer. American, are you?"

"Canadian. From Toronto."

"Ah, yes! I have a cousin in Winnipeg, actually. Well, leave this with us and we'll keep the bill minimal —"

Kate wandered the riverside, wondering how much water her coat could take before it gave up and floated away downstream. Her schedule, so painstakingly computed, was now a couple of days behind. She stared out over the leaden, rain-pitted water, the drooping willows, the lone skiff with its two oarsmen, oblivious to everything but the pull and dip of the wood cleanly cutting water. She bought postcards, images captured during sunlight, showing her riverside inn, and sent them to Duncan and

Enid. *A little wet, but lovely. Bet you don't get this until I've come back!* She climbed the narrow stairs to her room, read with difficulty for an hour, and fell asleep, exhausted.

Through the slow, circuitous drives to Oxford, and Cheltenham, Exeter and Wells, Kate felt a turning point in herself. The nerves of London, and the few hectic days following that visit, had sent her plummeting inexplicably from moods of high elation to anguished depression. A wrong turn that detoured her 20 miles into a narrowing, curling lane, burying her car below rampant hedges and waving grass, threw her into momentary panic. She'd pulled off on a side bare patch, stood helpless among bleating, red-dabbed sheep, cursing their blandness, her stupidity. Maybe the gods were trying to tell her something. Maybe she should get back to Gatwick and take the next flight home. But damn it all, do I *have* to have Duncan here to get me out of trouble? She'd finally calmed down, traced her error on the ordinance map, and with a heady sense of accomplishment, got herself back to a B road of such breathtaking beauty that the mistake turned into triumph.

As the two weeks slid behind her, with their succession of hushed cathedrals and soft, herb-scented fields, of minor crises faced and forgotten, Kate was aware of a change. At first, it seemed physical. She felt pliant and unhurried; the contrasting moods that had beggared her smoothed to a humming, velvety joy. Around turns in the road that had been so threatening, she now anticipated clusters of cottages, thatched, marked by small stone mushrooms; pubs, where the thud of darts punctuated warm Westcountry accents; towns and cities where the Romans, too, might have felt lonely at first. But her loneliness, stinging like a nettle, was gradually going — or being transformed. By the time she drove into Cirencester, parked opposite the 15th-century church, she had begun to feel like a local, steeped in lore and quite content to be alone.

The main street bustled and rumbled, but she had booked a room ahead at the King's Head, so Tudor that she expected to see Henry's stocky swagger blocking the low doorway. It was an extravagance, but time was short; she wanted the swift drive back to the airport to be made easier by memories so rich that they drove everything else away. The clouds that had followed her relentlessly had hesitated at the town's perimeter, and sun bathed the mellow Cotswold stone, gilded the copper beech trees, made her long, peaceful stroll through the vast park a time of visual poetry. *I am like Rafe in that way, cream-centred and soft, reduced to mush when left in the sun. It is Enid who is tough.* Maybe she had inherited just enough of Enid to avoid her father's strong streak of sentimentality — and just enough of Rafe to counterbalance her mother's tendency to indifference.

She ate in the hotel dining room — crimson cloths, tall cream candles, deeply carved sideboards, carts of clotted cream and glistening strawberry tarts and the genial hum of muted conversation. Seated alone, contemplating the empty place setting opposite her as she sipped a sherry: I am getting used to it — the unused silver, the starched napkin standing stiffly like a white sail, untouched. If, for some reason, I had to leave Duncan, if he left me, I know now that I could manage somehow. It was not what she wanted. It was what she *knew*. Beside her were two small tables where two separate couples, forced by proximity, had struck up a conversation.

"It *is* a lovely place to stay. One *knows* what to expect —"

"Civility," her husband interjected, spooning a dune of sugar into his tea. His wife twined her rope of pearls, smiling faintly at the other couple. "Harold and I come back here every year — *every* year. Twenty-two now, isn't it dear?"

"Twenty-one I believe. Tried Bristol in '53. Rained the whole bloody week." He grimaced at the memory.

The other couple, into their salad, nodded and murmured, marveling at the record. They were only slightly younger, perhaps in their late sixties. They looked relieved when the others rose to go.

"Like us," the husband said. His wife did not respond, but lapsed with him into habitual, carnivorous silence. Not once did they speak again, and Kate shuddered at their holiday, this leaden annual pilgrimage. Their wedding rings were handcuffs, the much-vaunted togetherness an endurance test. Was it possible that none of us are meant to meld our lives so completely, that the final separation everyone dreaded — even Enid and Rafe — was just what was needed all along, only in considerate, planned bits and pieces? Kate realized that her decision to go away, and Duncan's refusal to stop her, were nothing more than a natural need to be apart for a time. Neither wanted to lose the loner's ability to cope, the partner's power to surprise, to find themselves whirlpooled down into sullen predictability.

Enid had told her that she had to find her own solutions, and this discovery was not for everyone. But Kate felt the rightness of it. Parting was not just sweet sorrow — for her, it had been revelation. She wanted to impart the news to the couple beside her, tap her goblet for silence and announce it to the room. *Don't tell them.* She smiled into her consommé, missing Duncan with a new, healthy need, knowing he would be at the airport when she landed in the Canadian cold, huddled in his overcoat beyond the waiting-room windows, needing her. *Don't tell them. Tell Duncan.* ■